

Architecture, Society, and Ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia: Doors, Dwellings, and Domestic Space

BY MARIANNE HEM ERIKSEN

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The Viking Period captures the imagination of academics and the general public alike. Just as the range of popular depictions of the Vikings has grown over the years (including a dedicated sub-genre of Heavy Metal music), so too has the variety of topics which archaeologists have considered for this period. Marianne Hem Eriksen provides a vital contribution to a hitherto understudied aspect of Viking Period archaeology: the settlement record of Norway. Drawing on data from 65 Norwegian sites, many of which are comparatively new discoveries, Eriksen constructs a fascinating study. Her stated objective is “to breathe life into the postholes and hearths archaeologists excavate”. It is an objective which Eriksen certainly achieves.

Architecture, Society, and Ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia is composed of three parts: introduction and theoretical background (Part I), a discussion of the settlement record in Viking Period Norway (Part II), and a consideration of ritual aspects associated with these structures (Part III). An appendix towards the end of the book provides readers with a comprehensive list of all the discussed sites, including key information such as dating (relative or absolute), house orientation and references. Throughout, Eriksen reminds

her reader that the data are far from ideal. Like much settlement archaeology from Western Europe in the last forty years, Eriksen's sites draw largely from rescue excavations. The overall structure of *Architecture, Society, and Ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia* follows the standard approach: introduction, literature review, theoretical discussion, analysis of the data, contextualising the data within a broader archaeological and social frame, specific case studies, and finally conclusion. However, it is what Eriksen does within this structure that makes this book such a provocative study.

Beginning in Chapter One, aptly titled 'Entry Points', Eriksen introduces us to the recurring theme of study: the doorway. She describes the origins of this study and justifies its purpose, namely a perceived lack of social archaeological studies for the Viking Period. Although focussing on the Viking Period in Norway, and at times the wider Scandinavian world, the theoretical foundations of this study are firmly rooted in British post-processualism. In Chapter Two, 'The Power of the Door', Eriksen defines the theoretical framework of her study. Her approach is heavily influenced by ideas of assemblage theory, incorporating ideas of the archaeology of emotion and *rites de passage*. The theoretical discussion of Chapter Two is concise but thorough. With her theoretical approach defined, Eriksen returns to a discussion of the significance of doors. Although the number of known Viking Period doors from Scandinavia is slight (seven doors and one doorframe; p. 26), she effectively supplements this by discussing a variety of contemporary depictions of doors. These include actual doors, such as the example from Kaupang, Norway to a variety of depictions, ranging from a coin from Birka, Sweden to more abstract forms, such as hogback stones from Britain.

Having brought the reader back to the door, Eriksen continues to Part II, and introduces the longhouses to which the doors were affixed (Chapter Three). The reader is then taken on a tour of the longhouse, other types of settlement in Viking Period Norway, and has the importance of the hearth, hall, byre and other rooms explained to them. Eriksen then discusses the men, woman and children of different ages and statuses who would have lived in the longhouse,

and what activities they would have engaged in. The role of animals and human-animal relationships is also considered in some detail. The benefit of this approach is that when issues of access analysis are introduced in Chapter Four, the reader understands why access to the different rooms may act as a physical and social gateway or barrier. Eriksen's analysis predominantly focuses on the type and quantity of different entrances and provides an access analysis in an effort to explore how people would have moved within a longhouse. Thus, a bed in the byre or a seat by the hearth are not simply a matter of taking a greater or lesser number of steps from outside; such locations, when combined with a critical use of ethnographic and literary sources like Eriksen employs, can greatly inform us about the social status of the individuals who occupied these spaces.

Eriksen continues with the theme of the longhouse as a social structure in Chapter Five, 'Networked Landscapes'. In this final chapter of Part II, Eriksen situates the longhouses within their landscapes. She considers not only the geography, climate and resources of the surrounding landscape, but also—true to post-processual traditions—the cosmology of the landscape as Eriksen argues that a longhouse was constructed with reference to the physical, mental and mythological. As in Chapters Three and Four, Eriksen employs literary evidence to support her findings. She makes it clear to the reader that many of these sources post-date the Viking period, and are not Norwegian in origin, but that she feels they may have some merit to them. I suspect some readers may question the applicability or relevance of these texts, even if personally I find this indeed enhances the discussion as Eriksen carefully interweaves these with the archaeological data. The theme of movement likewise continues in this chapter, with Eriksen considering how people approached houses and moved around in the enclosures outside them. Furthermore, the models she constructs, although sharing many common themes, are not universal and static, but regional and dynamic.

In Part III, 'Ritual Objects, Ritual Spaces', Eriksen leaves the day-to-day dynamics of the longhouse to consider its ritual side. The post-processual credentials of this study are on full display here, with the

door once again becoming the focus for discussion. In Chapter Six, Eriksen develops her ideas of the longhouse being a living entity, drawing upon the link between doorways and sexualised rituals, with the former being likened to bodily thresholds such as female genitalia. Likewise, the choice of objects deposited within longhouses, and in particular on the threshold is examined, with Eriksen considering the performative nature of these objects. Chapter Six considers a limited body of archaeological data. Once again, literary and historical sources from across the wider Scandinavian world are employed to support Eriksen's conclusions. Although she makes for convincing arguments in my opinion, as in Chapter Five, readers who do not approach this work from a post-processual background may find this chapter the least convincing as the quantity of archaeological data at Eriksen's disposal is slight, due in large part to her dataset being obtained from rescue excavations which did not undertake complete excavations of sites. Hence, the author's recourse to alternative interpretative aids. Chapter Seven places the emphasis on the life of longhouses and concludes with the fitting topic of death. The idea of the doorway being a portal is once again explored, with Eriksen drawing strong parallels between the role of the door in longhouses and entrances from various Viking ritual structures. Likewise, the idea that the house can die is also examined, with a fascinating discussion of the interplay between human remains and these structures. There is a greater emphasis on the archaeological material in this chapter, with recourse to consider a wider array of sites, such as the portal structure from Åby, Sweden.

In sum, this is an excellent study, which accomplishes what it sets out to do "to breathe life into the postholes and hearths archaeologists excavate". If, like Eriksen, you are receptive to the ideas of the post-processualist schools of thought, you will be enraptured by her arguments and theoretical underpinnings. Yet this volume is not just about theory though: the dataset which Eriksen employs is certainly substantial enough to support many of her conclusions, placing the theory in practice. Indeed, the bibliography is a good reflection of this. There is a comprehensive list of Anglosphere and Scandinavian

authors, many of whom are fervent post-processualists. By contrast, only a few German authors are listed; something which is surprising considering the topic of this work. Philologists, historians and specialists in Scandinavian literature may caution the way Eriksen uses these data to support her conclusions. However, I believe that Eriksen is sufficiently critical with her non-archaeological sources that her use of them does contribute to this study. Settlement evidence often lacks the immediate appeal of trade or mortuary archaeology with their, at times, opulent artefacts, and in her closing chapter Eriksen notes this problem. But despite the challenges of working with a scatter of post-holes and phosphate maps, Eriksen has produced a living image of Viking Period settlement in Norway. Instead of looking at a site plan with an associated access analysis diagram, I found myself imagining how it would have been like to have walked through the outer fields and courtyard towards the door of a longhouse, wondering if I would have been permitted access, and where I would have been permitted to move inside. Not everyone may agree with Eriksen, but I recommend that everyone read her work.